

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

September 19, 2002

Director Kathleen Clarke
Bureau of Land Management
United States Department of the Interior
1849 C Street
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Director Clarke:

We are concerned about potential changes to Bureau of Land Management (BLM) off-road vehicle (ORV) management policies as they relate to resource management planning. Specifically, it has come to our attention that the BLM is amending the agency's land use planning manual (M-1601) and handbook (H-1601-1) by directing field staff to delay off-road vehicle road/route designation to a secondary planning process commonly known as travel management (TMP). It is further our understanding that these changes are being implemented without an opportunity for public comment. Our concern is compounded by BLM's historic difficulties in implementing an effective management regime to provide reasonable recreational opportunities without causing permanent impairment or unnecessary or undue degradation to our public lands.

The current framework as required by Executive Orders 11644 & 11989, and BLM's regulations, manual, handbook, and National Management Strategy for Off-Road Vehicles dictates that all off-road vehicle route designations must be established in the resource management plans. Any attempt or direction to delay planning and decision-making into the indefinite future should not be considered. We are concerned that this amendment to the planning manual and handbook will reduce agency accountability, increase inconsistency amongst BLM management units, and make worse the current practice whereby pressing management decisions are constantly deferred into the future. For example, the BLM Price field office in Utah has neglected to prepare a travel management plan for eleven years, despite promising a U.S. District court that they would have one completed by May 2001. Fundamentally, these proposed amendments could negatively affect particular management units within the National Landscape Conservation System.

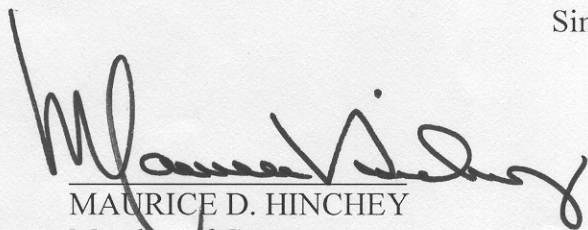
While the BLM may cite other management priorities – e.g., oil & gas development – as a reason to delay off-road vehicle road/route designation in resource management plans, such priorities must not be met by weakening or ignoring long-standing, but too often ignored, legal mandates. Such actions are misguided and will only alienate large segments of the American people. As the BLM itself stated to Congress in a February 2000 report entitled *Land Use Planning for Sustainable Decisions*, “[i]ntensified controversy over OHV use is inevitable unless the BLM can revise or amend existing [land use plans] to reflect changes in regulations and public expectations.” As a result of this report, Congress appropriated funds to the BLM to revise its largely outdated and infirm resource management plans. Such plans are not merely a vehicle to expedite energy development. Resource management plans are designed to resolve a myriad of public land management issues by establishing an integrated and cohesive management framework to maintain or restore the health and integrity of the land. From our perspective, road/route designations are integral to these plans as they address natural resource and user conflicts associated with off-road vehicles.

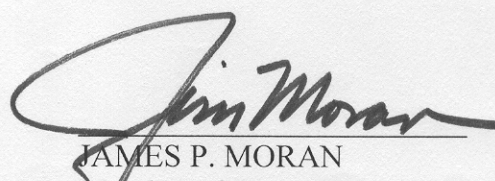
The BLM should not amend the manual and handbook, or any other policies for that matter, to instruct land managers to defer road/route designations in a separate process. In the spirit of Secretary Norton's "4-C's" policy, in the service of conservation, the BLM should consult, cooperate, and communicate with the public before deciding to change such an important policy.

As Appropriators, we are disappointed with the possibility that funding provided to the BLM for resource management plans may not be spent wisely and in a manner that will address the very shortcomings in land use plans for which the funding was provided. We urge the Bureau of Land Management to comply with the plain meaning of the law and pursue off-road vehicle road/route designations in the resource management planning process.


Thank you for your prompt consideration of this request. I look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience.


Sincerely,

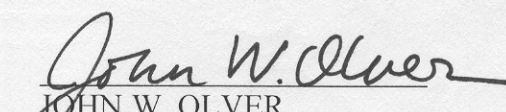

MAURICE D. HINCHEY
Member of Congress



JAMES P. MORAN
Member of Congress

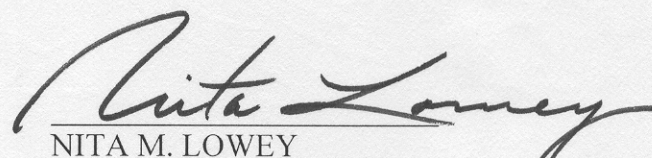

SAM FARR
Member of Congress

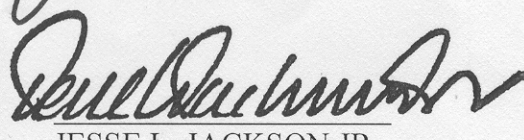

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